

9. SPEEDERS

The official name of this vehicle is a Railway Motorcar. It is known as a “speeder”, “jitney”, “rail car”, “track car” and “putt-putt” (for the noise the first one-cylinder motor made).

The motorcar was used for inspection and light maintenance of track and signals. It weighs from 800 lbs. and up. The lighter cars have handles that pull out from the back so that it may be picked up like a wheelbarrow and moved on and off the track at a grade crossing. The heavier cars have hydraulic turntables that allow them to do the same. They are powered by a two-cylinder, 18-hp engine and are capable of speeds as high as 45 mph on well maintained rail; however, the normal cruising speed is 20 mph. A two-speed transmission drives the rear axle with a motorcycle type chain. There is a friction brake lever that is pushed to apply the brake shoes on the outside of each wheel. The wheels and brakes are insulated so they will not activate signals and crossing gates like a train would.

Between 1980 and 1985 the railroads began dispensing with motorcars. They have replaced them with pick-up trucks adapted to run on rails, called “hyrailleurs”. Rail fans purchased the motorcars at auctions. The first organized clubs were formed in 1990 to restore, preserve and display the vehicle on planned, legal excursions. Members belong to the North American Railcar Owners Association, and are insured, licensed and regulated by that organization.

Motorcars used by enthusiasts are modified for safety reasons. They are required to have spark arresters, fire extinguishers, first aid kits, and a rear facing red light that is activated when the brakes are applied. Children under the age of 18 are required to wear bicycle style helmets. The federal law regarding the use of drugs and alcohol on or about railroad property is strictly enforced and prohibited.